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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that depression is associated with more accurate, and more negative, perceptions of one's own competence and the competence of significant others. This study examined the social perceptions of depressed versus nondepressed children in the context of their self-reported best friendship. Participating in the study were 360 third- through sixth-graders, with 86 children selected as target children based on high or low scores on the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI). Target children were paired with their self-reported best friend to play games. Using the Friendship Qualities Measure, both partners reported on their enjoyment of the game-playing session and on the positive qualities of the "friendship." Findings indicated that reciprocal friendships were rated more positively by both partners than were nonreciprocal friendships. The target child's depression status was not associated with differences in either partner's assessments of positive friendship qualities. When the relationship was not reciprocal, depression buffered the effects of lack of reciprocity on declining ratings of friendship qualities. Depressed children and their partners had better agreement on their ratings of positive qualities in the relationship than did nondepressed children and their partners. (KB)

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Depression and Friendship Reciprocity: Relation to Congruence in Perception About Positive Friendship Qualities

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Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Albuquerque, NM. April 15, 1999.

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Introduction

Past research has shown that depression is associated with more accurate, and more negative, perceptions of one's own competence and the competence of significant others (e.g., Gotlib & Meltzer, 1987). Depression is associated with a negative evaluation of one's social competence compared to an objective evaluation of social performance (Gara, Woolfolk, Cohen, & Goldston, 1993). The present study examined the perceptions of depressed children and their friends concerning the positive qualities of their friendships.

Hypothesis 1: Friendship interactions involving a depressed target child will be perceived by both partners as having less positive characteristics (e.g., intimacy, help and guidance), compared to perceptions of nondepressed dyads.

Hypothesis 2: Reports of children in nonreciprocal dyads will be less positive than those of reciprocal dyads, since the partners in nonreciprocal friendships have not chosen the target child as one of their best friends. Further, depression may interact with reciprocity, placing depressed children in nonreciprocal relationships at increased risk for negative partner evaluations.

Hypothesis 3: Depressed children's friendships will have more discrepancy between partners on ratings of positive qualities, compared to those of nondepressed children. This will be due to underestimation of positive friendship qualities by the depressed child.

Method

Subjects

Participants in the study included 360 third- through seventh-grade children: 160 (44.4%) boys and 200 (55.5%) girls; 334 (92.8%) were European-American, 21 (5.8%) were African-American, and 5 (1.4%) were of other ethic backgrounds. From the larger sample, 170 children (85 dyads) were chosen to participate in the friendship evaluation, based on depression scores and friendship nominations. Forty-nine depressed target children were chosen based on having CDI scores of 13 or higher. Thirty-six nondepressed children were selected, with CDI score 6 or less. Fifty-nine of the friendships were reciprocal, and twenty-six were nonreciprocal.

Measures

1. Children completed the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1982), a well-established self-report measure of depressive symptoms. Children were categorized as "depressed" if they had a score of 13 or higher, and as "nondepressed" if they had a score of 6 or lower on the CDI.

2. Children were also asked to select their three best friends from a class roster. As in past research (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1993; Grotpeter & Crick, 1996), children were designated "reciprocal best friends" if both children chose each other as one of their three best friends.

3. Friendship Assessment. Each member of selected friendship pairs completed the Friendship Qualities Measure (Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Children rated how often a variety of behaviors happened in this friendship on a five-point scale, from "not at all" to "all of the time." In addition, dyads completed a 3-item post-game evaluation after 30-minutes of game-playing (see Table 1).

Question 1: Do depressed children and their partners perceive their friendships to have less positive qualities, in comparison with nondepressed children and their partners?

NO. Results revealed NO main effect for depression in a 2 (depression status) by 2 (reciprocity) MANOVA (Table 2, means in Table 3) of positive friendship qualities.

Question 2: Do target children and their partners in reciprocal friendships perceive their friendships to have more positive qualities, in comparison with children in nonreciprocal relationships?

YES. A 2 (depression status) by 2 (reciprocity) MANOVA (Table 2) of positive friendship qualities revealed significant main effects for both target child's and friend's reports of positive qualities, with children in reciprocal relationships reporting more positive qualities.

An interaction existed for the partner's report of positive qualities (but not in the direction expected, see Figures 1-4). Follow-up analyses revealed that in the context of nonreciprocal relationships, depressed children's partners rated their relationships more positively than did nondepressed children's partners.

Question 3: Are depressed children and their partner's ratings of positive friendship qualities less congruent than the ratings of nondepressed children and their partners?

NO. In fact, the opposite is true for "Validation and Caring" and "Companionship and Recreation." For those particular friendship qualities, depressed children and their partners are more congruent than nondepressed children and their partners.

Table 1
Internal Reliability Alphas for the FQM Subscales and Post-game Evaluation

Subscale	Cronbach's alpha	Example Item
Validation and Caring	.73	Makes me feel good about my ideas
Companionship and Recreation	.75	Plays with me at recess
Help and Guidance	.69	Gives me advice w/ figuring things out
Intimate Exchange by Target Child	.82	I can tell him / her my secrets
Intimate Exchange by Friend	.74	She / he can tell me his / her secrets
Conflict Resolution	.71	Easy to make up when we have a ight
Satisfaction	.80	How well is this friendship going?
Post-game Evaluation	.94	How much did you enjoy playing games with <partner's name>?

Table 2
MANOVA Results: Target Child and Partner Reports on FQM (n=86 dyads)

	F-value: Depression Status of Target Child	F-value: Reciprocity of Friendship Dyad	F-value: Depress X Recip
Target Child's Report	2.13	2.41*	2.08
Partner's Report	1.57	3.99**	2.44*

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations By Depression and Reciprocal Status: FQM Subscales Target Child and Partner Reports (n=86 dyads)

	Depressed Mean (S.D.)	Nondepress Mean (S.D.)	Reciprocal Mean (S.D.)	Nonrecip Mean (S.D.)
Target Child's Report				
Companionship	3.93 (.64)	4.08 (.74)	4.08 (.63)	3.79 (.77)
Conflict Resolution	3.93 (.89)	4.15 (.72)	3.92 (.90)	4.24 (.59)
Help and Guidance	3.79 (.82)	3.69 (.81)	3.72 (.81)	3.79 (.84)
Intimate Exchange -F	3.96 (.91)	3.86 (.90)	3.83 (.89)	4.09 (.91)
Intimate Exchange-TC	3.87 (.96)	3.71 (1.01)	3.82 (.88)	3.73 (1.20)
Validation and Caring	4.08 (.85)	4.31 (.62)	4.16 (.73)	4.17 (.87)
Satisfaction	4.56 (.50)	4.81 (.91)	4.75 (.70)[g]	4.46 (.71)[g]
Partner's Report				
Companionship	4.02 (.89)	3.78 (1.22)	4.24 (.73)[a]	3.18 (1.27)[a]
Conflict Resolution	4.09 (.78)	4.02 (1.04)	4.18 (.79)[b]	3.78 (1.07)[b]
Help and Guidance	3.34 (.91)	3.27 (1.18)	3.47 (.94)[c]	2.93 (1.13)[c]
Intimate Exchange -F	3.70 (1.08)	3.43 (1.39)	3.85 (1.04)[d]	2.97(1.40)[d]
Intimate Exchange-TC	3.93 (.90)	3.59 (1.22)	3.98 (.87)[e]	3.36 (1.31)[e]
Validation and Caring	4.12 (.75)	3.77 (1.14)	4.12 (.83)[f]	3.64 (1.13)[f]
Satisfaction	4.26 (.92)	4.33 (1.11)	4.62 (.60)[h]	3.54 (1.30)[h]

Note. Means designated with the same superscripted letter were significantly different from one another at the $p<.05$ level, according the LSD post-hoc test.

Table 5

Means of Difference Scores and ANOVA Main Effects for Depression and Reciprocity: Friendship Qualities Measure Subscales and Post-game Evaluation

	Mean (S.D) for Depressed Target Children	Mean (S.D) for Nondepressed Target Children	Mean (S.D.) for Reciprocal Friendships	Mean (S.D.) for Nonreciprocal Friendships
Validation and Caring	-.04[a] (.96)	.54[a] (1.08)	.05[c] (.98)	.53[c] (1.14)
Companionship and Recreation	-.09[b] (.95)	.31[b] (.88)	-.15[d] (.74)	.62[d] (1.10)
Help and Guidance	.46 (1.15)	.43 (1.18)	.25[e] (1.17)	.87[e] (1.03)
Intimate Exchange by Subject	.17 (1.10)	.28 (1.29)	-.01[f] (1.03)	.76[f] (1.31)
Intimate Exchange by Friend	.03 (1.07)	.27 (1.35)	-.14[g] (1.07)	.73[g] (1.24)
Conflict Resolution	-.14 (1.04)	.13 (1.01)	-.26[h] (1.04)	.46[h] (.85)
Satisfaction	.30 (.87)	.47 (1.15)	.10[i] (.85)	.92[i] (1.17)
Post-Game Evaluation	.17 (.58)	.13 (.51)	.04[j] (.53)	.38[j] (.53)

Note. Means designated with the same superscripted letter were significantly different from one another at the $p<.05$ level.

Summary

- Contrary to prediction, the reciprocal friendships of depressed children were just as positive as the reciprocal friendships of nondepressed children, according to partner report.
- As predicted, friendship reciprocity was associated with significantly more positive ratings of friendship qualities.
- Surprisingly, when the relationship was not reciprocal, depression buffered the effects of lack of reciprocity on declining ratings of friendship qualities. In other words, if the partner was depressed and the relationship was not reciprocal, the partner did not report the expected decline in positive friendship qualities.
- Contrary to prediction, depressed children and their partners tended to have better agreement on their ratings of positive qualities in the relationship, than did nondepressed children and their partners.

Figure 1
Depression by Reciprocity Interaction for Partner's Report of Conflict Resolution

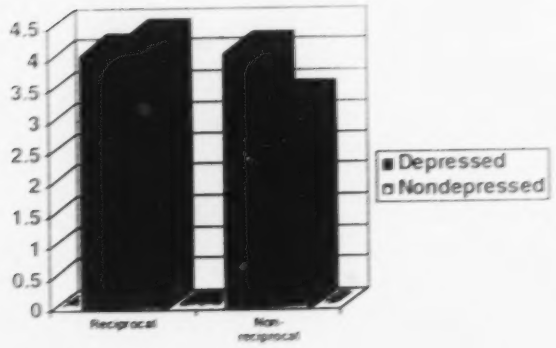

Figure 2
Depression by Reciprocity Interaction for Partner's Report of Partner's Intimate Exchange

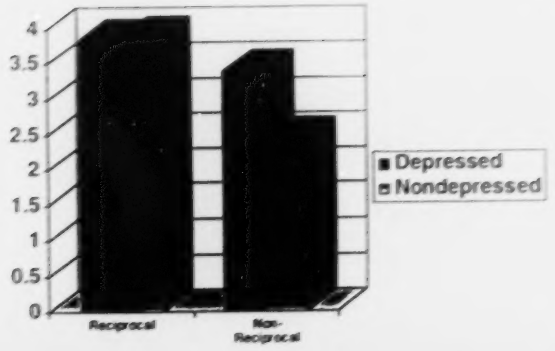

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Figure 3
Depression by Reciprocity Interaction for Partner's Report of Target Child's Intimate Exchange

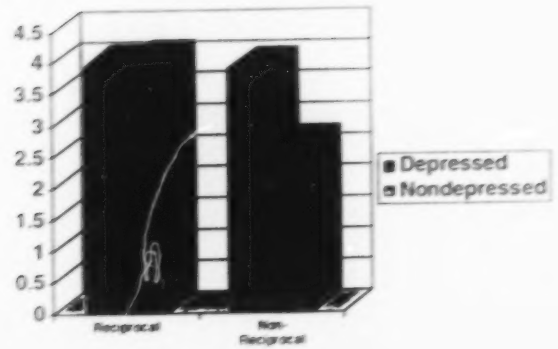
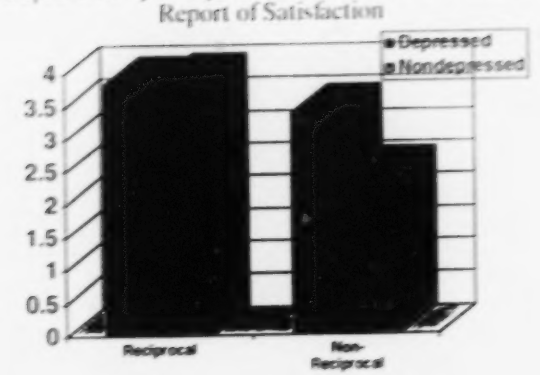


Figure 4
Depression by Reciprocity Interaction for Partner's Report of Satisfaction



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Discussion / Future Directions

These findings suggest that the relation between depression, social competence, and social perceptions is complex. These results suggest that depressed children have the skills to perform well in the context of a positive friendship interaction with the friend of their choice. Yet, past research has shown that depressed children are rated by teachers and other children as less socially competent.

More research is needed to assess what depressed children are doing or not doing, that causes them to be chosen as friends less frequently. Perhaps the depression makes it less likely that the child will actively engage in a task, but once placed in the situation (as in this study), has the skills to perform well. If so, the standard "social skills" intervention approach will only be effective if aimed at creating opportunities for the depressed child to interact with other children in structured activities.

In the cognitive domain, these findings did not support the premise that depressed children underestimate the their own social competence, in comparison with their partner's report. In fact, depressed children and their partners were significantly more congruent in their ratings of Companionship and Recreation and Validation and Caring, than were nondepressed children and their partners. This suggests that depressed children may be more attuned than others to social cues from their partner. Further research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Further analyses are underway to assess the social behavior and expressed emotion of both partners during the game-playing situation, and how those variables relate to children's perceptions about the relationship. It is hoped that this research will help further understanding of depressed children's interactions, which may inform intervention efforts towards more positive peer relationships.

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